

Between Knowledge and the Need to Defend Against It – According to "The Country Doctor" – Kafka

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Abstract

This article discusses Kafka's story "The Country Doctor" through its traditional dynamic interpretation (Golomv, 1988) and an existentialist perspective. This perspective understands ontological helplessness as a central theme in understanding the individual. Traditional dynamic interpretation serves as a powerful tool for understanding human behavior and motivations; however, regarding ontological helplessness, it also serves as a means of escape and defense against it. By reading Kafka's story, one can better understand why it is important to defend against ontological helplessness. The question that arises from this is: Can psychoanalysis, especially in light of Kohut's (Kohut, 1984) contributions, address the ontological helplessness of the individual and his defensiveness toward it?

Keywords: Kafka, existential, dynamic, defense, ontological

1. Introduction

Kafka's story "The Country Doctor" presents the reader with the ontological sense of helplessness experienced by humans, alongside the unceasing attempts of the individual to defend against it. This feeling significantly influences human life, primarily due to the individual's self-awareness. Traditional dynamic interpretation cannot confront the ontological helplessness of the individual, one reason being that the recognition of these feelings, stemming from self-awareness, contradicts Freud's fundamental therapeutic principle – the increase of self-awareness at the expense of the unconscious.

The perspective of early psychoanalytic theories on early childhood, primary object relations, and the individual's internal world, which is created as a result of these object relations, can miss alternative viewpoints that can be seen through Kafka's lens. Kafka reveals the dangers present in human consciousness, through which one can view the general therapeutic principle of enhancing self-awareness, and one can also understand the patient from a different perspective – not necessarily through his early object relations, but through the individual's predicament and helplessness. It is difficult to understand Kafka without addressing these directions. However, these directions do not necessarily contradict the dynamic spirit. Rather, they attempt to illuminate dark and unfamiliar corners within it. Therefore, the essence of this article is not an attack but an exposure; an attempt to reveal blind spots in the dynamic understanding.

What will be emphasized in this article is not how Kafka arrived at the central themes and motifs within his works from his early childhood, nor how the trapped and helpless person described in his stories reflects Kafka's internal world, but rather how the trapped and helpless individual depicted in his stories reflects each and every one of us, beyond our different and unique internal worlds. Kafka describes feelings that exist in humans, not as a result of their history, but as a result of their very existence in the world and their self-awareness of this existence. This article, which seeks to understand Kafka from an existentialist perspective, actually develops new directions that Freud began to explore.

2. Psychodynamic Analysis of "the Country Doctor"

Golomv places the concept of ambivalence at the center of her interpretation of the story, finding textual evidence for forbidden desires, a harsh superego, and obsessive-compulsive neurosis with anal fixation from which the doctor suffers. She hypothesizes that the doctor's difficulties in realizing his genital sexuality stem from an unresolved Oedipal complex. Golomv raises hypotheses regarding the doctor's sexual desires toward Rosa and his mother, including desires to spy on the sexual act, homosexual feelings toward the boy, and aggressive wishes toward his father, which have resurfaced and manifested in a death wish toward the boy and himself.

Golomv utilizes the doubts and ambivalence that arose within her while reading the story and, by connecting them to theoretical materials, concludes that the central theme of the story is the doctor's blindness to the sources of his difficulties and his inability to act (Golomv, 1988). Therefore, one can summarize Golomv's approach to understanding the story as an attempt to comprehend the text and the emotions evoked in her during the reading, based on a psychodynamic analysis of the doctor's personality and desires, through understanding his internal world and early object relations.

3. "The Country Doctor" From an Existentialist Perspective

From the beginning of the story, feelings of lack of control, randomness, and hopelessness are evident. "I was in great confusion: I was about to undertake an urgent journey: a dying patient awaited me in a remote village... I had a carriage... but the horse was missing... Now my servant was running around the village, asking for a horse on my behalf, but there was no hope for that: I knew it, and without purpose, I stood still, motionless, the snow fell and accumulated on me, and I was becoming more and more numb beneath it". (Kafka, 1973, p. 108)

This initial situation of the story carries a scent of death. The doctor is helpless because he cannot fulfill his role. The snow accumulates upon him, and he freezes with despair. In the next situation, a groom appears from an abandoned pigsty, offering his two horses for the doctor's benefit. However, it soon becomes clear that the groom's goodwill stems from his desire to rape the servant. The doctor tries to prevent this by telling the groom that if he does not join him on the journey, the entire trip will be canceled. Nevertheless, the groom shouts "giddy-up," and the doctor is carried in his cart, paralyzed, as he hears the servant's screams and the groom's assault on his home.

The randomness responsible for the finding of the horses, which was supposed to help the dying patient, is also responsible for the servant's rape. This situation also raises the question of the choice and control that an individual has over his fate. Is there a free choice here, the choice between the patient's death and the servant's rape? Or is such a choice itself a form of rape, and is being caught in this situation not a choice at all? The doctor's horse dies, and no one is willing to lend him a horse. In light of all this, it seems that the doctor is at the mercy of unseen forces, playing and tossing him between hope and despair.

The third situation reveals the significance of the doctor's life, the respect afforded to him, his status, and the sense of power he holds. The parents of the sick boy run to him, and when he examines the boy (Kafka, 1973), the parents stand silently, waiting for his opinion. The nurse brings a chair for the doctor, removing his fur coat. They offer him a glass of rum, and the father pats him on the shoulder. Yet something terrible happens to the doctor.

First, he discovers that the boy is gravely ill and that he cannot save him. The doctor stands face to face with the fact that he cannot heal him. Despite the great respect he has earned, he is not God, and as a mortal, he is unable to help. Additionally, he confronts his own helplessness as a human being. The villagers who previously revered him strip him of his clothes and lay him beside the patient. The school choir sings:

"If he is stripped, he will heal,

And if he does not heal – he will die,

For he is only a doctor, only a doctor". (Kafka, 1973, p. 112)

This situation points to the helplessness of the individual and also shows a possible reaction to awareness of this state – passivity, collapse of strength, and self-neglect. The doctor is required to do something that he cannot accomplish! Suddenly, the status we acquire, the mantle we wear, and the divine functions we have assumed become irrelevant. There may always come a moment when human helplessness is revealed beneath the varied garments.

The doctor, who embodies the greatest warrior against death, who sometimes feels like the God who saves the helpless, finds himself naked and helpless. Everything he has done throughout his life, the hard studies, the sacrifices, the strenuous work, count for nothing! Everything he has achieved in life is undermined.

The patient complains to the doctor; he senses the doctor's helplessness, realizing that they are both in the same bed, in the same labyrinth, and the doctor acknowledges his correctness, expressing how guilty he feels. The dialogue between them describes their shared awareness of helplessness.

Yet then the life instinct returns to the doctor and urges him to save his own soul. He will not be able to save the patient; his meaning as a doctor has collapsed, but perhaps he can save something if he becomes a philosopher. He can give meaning to the life of the patient and to his impending death. This is a possibility in which the individual seeks to escape his basic helplessness – searching for an explanation or belief that will provide meaning and significance to his life and death.

The doctor tells the boy: "Your wound is not human at all; it was created at a sharp angle, with two strokes of the axe. Many extend their shadows, and not one even hears the sound of the axe in the forest, let alone that the axe never approaches them closely..." (Kafka, 1973, p. 113) The boy hears these words and calms down.

We all seek explanations, meaning, and purpose in our lives, our deaths, and our actions in order to find peace. To find peace from the horror that may befall us when we stand naked before the ontological helplessness of our lives. The doctor's explanation imparts meaning to the boy's wound of death. The wound, which previously symbolized death, now becomes a sign of the boy's uniqueness and takes on some significance. This significance comforts and represses helplessness. It may seem absurd and paradoxical because how can one find peace when told that the death lurking within us gives meaning to our lives? Yet does a meaning that does not align with conventional logic not possess enough strength to calm the individual and alleviate his helplessness? Are not the explanations of religion concerning the afterlife more logical?

Shoham (Soham, 1977) discusses the importance of feelings of uniqueness and choice. The feeling of uniqueness is an existential ontological sensation of the self, an exclusive sense of the self that is not related to an object. In contrast, the feeling of choice is related to objects and is achieved relatively, to "the important others" within the reference group. With his explanation, the doctor connects the boy to that ontological feeling of uniqueness, thus freeing him from the suffering of contact with objects. Shoham depicts Christian mystics and others as having a common basis, which is the yearning to merge with the absolute, to create autonomy of being, anchored in the absolute and liberating itself from the world of object relations. (Soham, 1977)

The boy, wishing to believe in his uniqueness, receives "knowledge" that transcends space and time, and thus his impending death no longer troubles him. This is indeed an illusion, akin to the religious artifacts discussed by Freud, but these illusions, which appear absurd, often provide protection against helplessness.

In the final situation of the story, the doctor attempts to escape while he is naked and his coat drags in the snow. The horses also do not heed him. He wanders aimlessly, a miserable old man, and none among the rabble stirs a finger... He feels cheated and abandoned...

The doctor can attribute his nakedness to fate, randomness, or the rabble. The psychodynamic interpretation may attribute what happened to the doctor to unresolved internal conflicts or immature object relations, yet Kafka depicts the helplessness of the trapped individual as an unavoidable ontological feeling of every self-aware being. He describes the labyrinth in which the individual finds himself, his helplessness within that labyrinth, and the fact that the individual is within the labyrinth just as the labyrinth is within the individual.

Shoam (Soham, 1977) speaks of the most directed symbol of the absence of a trap, which is the figure of the home. The feeling of rootedness, of ground beneath one's feet, that the ship rocked in the stormy sea of life has found an anchor. Kafka's story precisely describes the lack of home, the exile, and the alienation in our world. The country doctor also knows that he will never return home.

Every reader and individual confronts the absurdity of their lives differently, and thus will understand Kafka in their own way. However, a true existentialist approach cannot dismiss any human way of confronting the human helplessness of the individual in their world. This is because it recognizes how difficult and threatening it is for the individual to live with their insignificance and lack of meaning, and how much they need some way, even if illusory or psychotic, to cope with such a threat.

4. The Central Theme in Kafka

Is there any central theme in all of Kafka's writings? Kafka focuses on the tragic side of human consciousness and the feelings of helplessness experienced by the hero in relation to his longing for home, blind fate, incurable illness, the individual's predicament, and human ontological helplessness.

Golomv concludes that the central theme of this story is the doctor's blindness to the essence of his ambivalence, to its sources, and to its connection with his inability to act. (Golomv, 1988)

The interpretation I propose differs. In my opinion, the doctor's problem is not his blindness, but rather his open eyes. These see his professional impotence, his helpless nakedness, concealed beneath his professional mantle, status, honor, and everything he has built in his life. In my view, the central process in the story is the doctor's awakening, not his blindness! The doctor is indeed unaware of his internal conflicts and drives, but throughout the story, he becomes aware of the feelings of helplessness and absurdity that confront him both as a doctor and as a human being. Against these, he has no remedy! If we cling to a psychodynamic understanding, we effectively choose to regard the ontological helplessness that Kafka describes, not as part of human existence, but as a pathology and a distortion of his early object relations.

However, Kafka depicts the absurdity in human life, and his stories illustrate the endless attempts of the individual to escape this predicament, which usually ends in the failure of the hero. This feeling of helplessness

conveyed by Kafka evokes despair in his readers but also a strong desire to escape the traps of paradoxes and the absurdity of multiple interpretations.

One way in which a person seeks to escape situations of helplessness is by interpreting and explaining absurd and trapped phenomena in which they are caught. Thus, Freud (Freud, 1968) describes the primitive human, who stands helpless before thunder and lightning, and his way of coping with uncontrollable phenomena is his path to seeking control. Bergman's interpretation and her sincere introspection help her escape the helplessness she felt while reading the story, and she concludes her article on an optimistic note:

"The fact that one can approach the text from countless perspectives, and that no unique reader can find them all, has turned into a source of appreciation for the text, rather than a reason for ambivalence and despair". (Golomv, 1988)

In fact, every attempt by the reader to explain Kafka is an attempt to escape the helplessness they encounter. A person cannot remain close to their feelings of helplessness. When they name them and explain their causes, this is already the beginning of the path to reorganizing themselves and defending against the overwhelming power of those feelings. This is part of the unending human endeavor to understand, define, and frame the threatening feelings that challenge their value and meaning as an individual, alone and transient.

In the wake of Camus, one might ask – are we seeking to escape human helplessness and find peace, or are we trying to stand before the Kafkaesque world, experience it, and attempt to confront it without trying to defend ourselves against it so much?

5. To Taste of the Tree of Knowledge

When searching for an existentialist interpretation of the story of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the question arises: Why did eating from the tree of knowledge lead to expulsion? What is it about that knowledge that, after tasting it, the human is subjected to expulsion, hard labor, and raising children in sorrow? After Adam and Eve tasted from the tree of knowledge, it is said: "And the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked" (Genesis Chapter 3). The first part of the verse describes the virtues of knowledge, which allowed humans to achieve scientific, technological, and cultural accomplishments, with consciousness being the tool for this. The second part of the verse describes the less pleasant result of acquiring awareness – the human realizes he is naked!

Knowledge, in fact, enabled the human, according to the current interpretation, to be aware not only of his physical nakedness but also of his existential nakedness, and at that moment, the possibility of living in the Garden of Eden closed before him. Because a self-aware person who recognizes his weakness and limitations automatically ceases to live in the Garden of Eden.

Here arises the question: Why is consciousness dangerous for the individual? And why is it the source of human tragedy? Consciousness is both a blessing and a curse. In addition to its many advantages, humans are the only living creatures capable of reaching, through thought and self-reflection, an awareness of their helplessness, suffering, and the significance or lack of significance that pervades their lives. They are also the only ones capable of contemplating suicide. Animals can fall into states of helplessness but cannot feel and understand helplessness as part of their existence. They also cannot relate to their future. Consciousness allows the individual to understand and feel that despite being complicated, intelligent, and knowledgeable, despite having accumulated power and status, at any given moment, they could be reduced to dust due to a flat tire, an oncoming car, or a colonel who raised his finger, and his soldiers execute his orders. A person knows so much, yet can influence so little. While students at the University of Berlin studied Heidegger's existentialism, Jews were being burned in Treblinka.

A person knows history and evolution, yet their own history is brief. They possess knowledge of vast expanses but occupy only a small part of them.

Camus states (Kami, 1978): "Everything begins with consciousness, and nothing matters except by virtue of it." Both the feeling of omnipotence and the feelings of helplessness exist by virtue of it – both the meaning of these feelings, and their lack of meaning are experienced by virtue of consciousness.

If the individual were to constantly experience their helplessness, they might feel there is no point in working, functioning, or even starting a family. They would likely sink into depression or apathy, just like the doctor in the story "The Country Doctor." Through endless studies, the accumulation of power, titles, and wealth, extensive investment in work or family, creating a safe, protected, and loving space, we reduce the possibility of encountering our feelings of helplessness face to face. Thus, we strive to disconnect from the threatening and paralyzing feelings of helplessness in order to connect to opposing feelings such as power, control, significance, and value.

In the figure of God, a person concentrated all the qualities they aspired to: to cover their existential nakedness – eternity, omnipotence, the ability to create, to influence the universe, to give life or take it away. The creation of an all-powerful being that oversees their actions and rewards them, grants the individual security, stability, and control over their helplessness against nature. This is because it is upon that elusive, omnipotent figure that a person can exert influence. Freud (Freud, 1968, p. 87) described it thus: "Already the first step brings great reward; this step is the personification of nature... because against the superior humans, the creators of evil from outside, you can employ the same means you used within your own society: you can try to appease them, placate them, bribe them, and through this influence, strip them of part of their power".

According to Freud, all religious artifacts, along with cultural achievements, were born out of that need – "the necessity to defend against the overwhelming power of nature." Why must a person defend themselves? To this, Freud responds: "In this way, a treasure of artifacts is created, arising from the need to alleviate human helplessness". (Freud, 1968, p. 88)

The development of Freud's ideas in an existentialist direction may lead to the understanding that the need for massive psychological defense does not arise solely from the power of nature but primarily from the individual's capacity to be aware of their helplessness. This dangerous awareness may awaken in the individual in the face of the overwhelming power of nature or, for instance, in the face of a trial hanging over them, or in the face of the gap between their aspirations and their inability to realize them. What is important from an existentialist perspective is to be aware of this helplessness.

In light of Freud's description of cultural and religious enterprises as defenses against human helplessness, the question arises as to why even internal defense mechanisms do not provide protection against that helplessness? To cope with the helplessness that Kafka describes, massive defense is necessary to distort, temper, or even deny.

An integration of the two themes Freud develops – one, the theme of defense mechanisms, and the other, human helplessness, from which the individual seeks to escape through cultural and religious enterprises – may lead to a feeling of the ontological helplessness of the individual. This is not only as a cause for the external behavior of establishing grand enterprises but also as a factor in the development of internal defense mechanisms that also attempt to distance the individual from experiencing their helplessness in their world. Sometimes the engagement in defense mechanisms is a defensive occupation, and sometimes even engagement with death is an attempt to gain control over it. Any activity that increases control in our world and gives meaning to our actions distances us from the harsh experiences of helplessness. Existentialists may engage with death their entire lives without ever being close to it. Even if we attribute the individual's helplessness to their past, this may be a way to avoid confronting the ontological helplessness of the human being as part of their existence.

Thus, we may feel more potent professionally and personally; however, by this means, we will perceive human helplessness as a pathology that requires alteration rather than as part of ourselves .

In Kafka's works, the helplessness of the individual is not pathology but a part of their existence in the world. However, it is important to remember that early experiences of castration and narcissistic injuries also constitute a source of helplessness, but it is crucial to understand the difference between them. Ontological helplessness is an inherent part of human existence. It is inevitable to avoid or rid oneself of it by bringing it to consciousness. It is precisely when consciousness comes into contact with it that we discover the primary source of human suffering. Experiences of castration or narcissistic injuries, on the other hand, can lead to feelings of helplessness related to ontological helplessness, but if we attribute the patient's helplessness solely to those early experiences, we erase and fail to confront ontological helplessness. The latter is not dependent on object relations and is a central factor responsible for the individual's suffering.

6. On the Individual's Longing for Unity and Symbiosis

Kohut (Kohut, 1984) claims that the human need for a self-object is persistent and continues throughout life. Shoham discusses developmental components that separate the individual from a 'symbiotic Eden', devoid of boundaries, and send them into loneliness, responsibility, and independence. In doing so, these create intense longings to return to that lost Eden by dismantling the barriers between them and objects. (Shoham, 1977). This unifying tendency can, according to Shoham, manifest in two main ways: first, through domination over the object and its incorporation into the individual, and second, through immersion in the object and sinking into it. Both the tendency to connect with the self-object and the two modes of expression of the unifying tendency describe an individual seeking to create a special connection with other objects. A connection that, in essence, attempts to partially dissolve the boundaries between the individual and the object, through a partial merging between them.

This unifying tendency, arising from the painful separations the individual has experienced, can be viewed not only from the individual's past but also from their future perspective. In other words, throughout our lives, we search for symbiosis or unity with the object, due to what we lost in childhood or due to the difficulty of fully

liberating ourselves from the dependency on objects. However, this is only part of the matter; another part relates to consciousness and the dangers inherent in it. We seek symbiosis and unity with the object because this is one of the best and most protective ways to defend against our basic helplessness as adults. In this way, we attempt to prepare for the future, which may be very threatening.

As adults, we are much more capable than as children of feeling our basic helplessness and the gap between the façade we have created for ourselves and our nakedness, as the country doctor feels in Kafka's story .

We search for unity, for the great father, for God, for the loving and accepting woman, not only because we have been expelled from Eden but also because in these aspirations we find refuge and shelter from the helplessness that dwells within us and in our depths .

Thus, our tendency as adults to seek symbiosis and unity is not merely the result of our childhood and its struggles but also a defense against the dangers that await us. We act according to memories, longings, and tendencies that originate in childhood, also to defend against the destructive power of our self-consciousness.

Does the one entering into symbiosis with the infant not only fulfill her longings for the lost Eden? Caring for the child, raising him, and creating him ex nihilo grant her divine functions that every adult seeks to escape from their basic helplessness.

Kohut (Kohut, 1984) teaches us that the yearning for self objects accompanies us throughout our lives. Our desire to unite with the object is universal and enduring.

Shoham (Shoham, 1977) speaks of the developmental stages that sever us from the symbiotic "Garden of Eden" and dispatch us into a life of responsibility, independence, and solitude. It is this severance that engenders an enduring longing to return to the lost "Garden of Eden." The yearning for symbiosis depicts the individual as endeavoring to forge a connection with other objects — an endeavor bound up with the dissolution of boundaries and a partial merging with them.

And what does a person ultimately want? To be God? Because this is the clearest antithesis to human helplessness and impotence .

The symbiosis is divine in that it allows the participant to shelter under the protective and all-powerful shadow of the symbiotic whole reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, thus protecting him and granting him strength. There is no doubt that this is one of the ways in which a person defends against the ontological helplessness in his life.

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